

IN MEMORIAM: ANNIE SULLIVAN.

Alexander Woolcott.

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## IN MEMORIAM: ANNIE SULLIVAN

BY ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

### I

**T**o the great woman who was the daughter of her spirit, Mrs. Macy was always 'Teacher,' and, in the household which grew up around these two, everyone called her that. The secretary who took her dictation, the chauffeur who stood guard, the newsboy at the corner — they all called her 'Teacher.' And still do, remembering her every hour of every day. 'Teacher would have said we should.' That posthumous opinion is enough. However unwelcome the burden, they shoulder it and go on.

But it was as Annie Sullivan that I always thought of her, and when at last I came to know her — I count it as one of my great pieces of good fortune that I did come to know her — it amused her vastly that I always called her Annie Sullivan. At her funeral, the small ghost I saw beside that blossom-laden coffin was not Mrs. Macy, nor Teacher either. It was Annie Sullivan, a child unkempt, star-crossed, desperate, dauntless — Annie Sullivan from the Tewksbury Almshouse.

The Sullivans were shanty Irish, and of all their hapless brood only three were still living, if you could call it that, when the frail mother joined the others in the graveyard. The father went on the drink then and, like an unmoored rowboat, drifted out of history, casually leaving his two youngest on the doorstep of the selectmen. Of these, Annie, the elder, was going on eleven. By some fever that had once ravaged the shanty, her eyes were so blighted that she could

hardly see at all. Jimmie was seven, a doomed and twisted little boy with a tubercular hip. His sister loved him with all her tremendous might, but the world and the almshouse were too much for Jimmie. He died within the year, and it calls for a young Dickens to describe the time when little orphan Annie crept into the improvised mortuary and crouched all night beside the wasted, misshapen body of the only person she loved in the world. Indeed, you need the wrathful and compassionate Dickens of *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* to do justice to the Tewksbury Almshouse as it was in the '70s of the last century, when General Grant was President in Washington and Jim Fisk was riding high in New York. Cripples, epileptics, syphilitics, stranded old folks, marked-down streetwalkers, drug addicts — all the acutely embarrassing mistakes of the community were put there where no one could see them, much as a slapdash housewife will tidy up for company by sweeping the dirt under the sofa. In that almshouse it must have taken a bit of doing to have faith in Massachusetts.

It was from a lively old prostitute who used to read *East Lynne* to her that Annie first heard there was a place somewhere in the world where she, too, might learn to read — a school for the blind called the Perkins Institution. Thereafter the Overseers of the Poor could not make their periodic inspections in peace, what with this wild child always darting out at them and demanding that they

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send her to that school. Once she caught hold of the right coat-tails — a visitor, with power to act, who saw the point. In no time a lone and stormy petrel, who could neither read nor write nor see, and to whom such fripperies as a nightgown and a toothbrush and a comb were unfamiliar refinements, was knocking at the door of the Perkins Institution. She was fourteen years old.

This school, the first of its kind anywhere, had been shouldered fifty years before by Samuel Gridley Howe, a gallant and gifted physician who has been overshadowed in the memory of his countrymen by the circumstance that his wife was the Mrs. Howe who wrote 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic.' He was the first to attempt the education of a child with neither sight nor hearing — little Laura Bridgman, after whom he named one of his own daughters, the Laura who was later to write *Captain January*. Never equipped to do battle with the world, Miss Bridgman lingered in the shelter of the Institution after Dr. Howe's death and was still there, a spinster pensioner, when Annie arrived. Because she, too, had no home to go to in vacation time, Annie was much thrown in old Laura's company and thereby became adept in the use of the hand alphabet. It is part of the endless fascination of Annie Sullivan's tapestry that in it the threads of destiny are thus so visible.

It was after she had run her course at the school that the doctors in Boston, even at a time when ophthalmic surgery was comparatively primitive, decided that the trouble with her shrouded eyes might be operable. It proved to be so. Wherefore she stood at twenty, lovely to look at, toughened by experience, a young woman with clear eyes who yet knew Braille and all the technique of darkness, a woman with sharp ears who yet knew by chance — or what we have the hardihood to call chance — the speech and the feelings of the deaf. At that fateful moment in space and time

there arrived at the Institution a letter from a certain Captain Keller of Tusculumbia, Alabama, wherein the pattern of Annie's tapestry first revealed its design.

The letter reported the plight of the captain's daughter. When this child, who had been christened Helen, was nineteen months old, some sickness had left her deaf and blind. Now she was seven, a mutinous, unmanageable animal, and would be needing something special in the way of a governess. In a book Mrs. Keller had read not long before, there was some account of a certain Laura Bridgman. But the book — it was *American Notes* by Charles Dickens — was already forty years old. This Dr. Howe and his protégée, could they still be living? It was a harness salesman from up Massachusetts way who, passing through Alabama, had then told the Kellers that the Perkins Institution, at least, was still in existence. The salesman had supplied its address. Thus Captain Keller's letter. Could the Institution recommend a governess? 'Annie, this looks like a job for you.'

The nominee invested a month in reading the manuscript of the diary which Dr. Howe had kept when he was learning to lead the Bridgman child out of the dark silence. While she was thus cramming for her first great test, the girls at the Institution clubbed together and bought a doll as a gift for Helen Keller. When old Laura made the clothes for it, that doll became not only a gift but a symbol and a talisman. Then Annie put the doll in her trunk, packed up her few belongings, afflicted herself with some new shoes that were far too tight for her, and started south. That was in March 1887.

## II

It began — this great adventure which soon the whole world was watching — in the cottage where for one racking month the strange teacher and her still stranger



pupil were left alone together. In the beginning was the word, and, in memory of Laura Bridgman, the word was 'doll.' Our poor imaginations falter in contemplating the feat of first reaching that inaccessible mind with the notion that there *was* such a thing as a word. We still find miraculous the indisputable fact that at twenty-four, with girls of her own age or thereabouts, Helen Keller was graduated from Radcliffe — *cum laude*.

At the final examinations in history and French and Latin and mathematics, Helen was left alone in the room with her typewriter and the questions which had been prepared in Braille. Teacher had wanted to stand by and tap those questions into Helen's hand, but Radcliffe excluded her from the room. It might have trusted her — might have relied on her capacity to become, at need, a mere instrument of transmission, as self-effacing, as profoundly modest, as essentially invisible as the black boys who attend the actors on the Japanese stage.

On that stage, though the black boys are there, the audience sees only the actors, and indeed it was only Helen the world saw at first. Or so at least it seemed to one envious boy poring over the contemporary magazine accounts of the children who were famous when he himself was a child. Wilhelmina, the girl queen of Holland; Alfonso, the boy king of Spain; Elsie Leslie, the child who was *Little Lord Fauntleroy* on the stage; Josef Hofmann, the boy pianist — I followed them all and begrudged them their eminence. In that great gallery was Helen Keller, and in particular there comes back to me the familiar picture taken with Mark Twain, Helen listening with her hand upon his lips.

But in time it dawned upon us all that if Helen Keller was one of the wonders of the world, this woman who had taught her must be at least as extraordinary, a suspicion born of logic and confirmed when in 1933 there was published Nella Braddy's distinguished and indispensa-

ble biography, *Anne Sullivan Macy: The Story behind Helen Keller* — the record of such a shining triumph of the human spirit as must make any man or woman who reads it thank God and take courage.

It was when that book was new upon the shelf that there was unfolded the substance for its last and as yet unwritten chapter, wherein the wheel comes full round and life is caught in the act of rhyming. It came in the form of news from a little village in Scotland where these now legendary twain had sought refuge. Annie Sullivan was blind again, and, in the half century during which her eyes had served her well enough, she had forgotten all the ways of blindness. After all these years, she was even having to take lessons in Braille again. It was Helen who taught her.

I first met her after she returned to America for the operation which would restore her sight for a second time — first met her in hospital where I learned that the gift to send a blind person every day from the florist is one small fragrant blossom that can be held in the hand. Let it be a gardenia, a sprig of mignonette, a bit of heliotrope, or, best of all, I think, some leaves of rose geranium. Great costly bouquets, befouled with bolts of satin ribbon, and stupefying plants were sent her in abundance. These, because she could not enjoy them herself, she passed on to a beau she had triumphantly acquired in hospital, the man in the next room. Bless me, if it was n't Sam Goldwyn!

Annie Sullivan and I were already old friends when we did meet, for a blind person is more dependent than most upon the broadcasters and, I uneasily suspect, is on to all our tricks and our manners, hears through all our poor little pretenses. Because I used to read aloud to her, now on my desk as I write is a crystal ball borne on the back of a crystal elephant. Annie Sullivan gave it to me for being a good boy.

But the meetings that I most fondly



remember were those when there would be a jabbering circle of us out at the house Helen used to own on Long Island — Annie Sullivan and Helen each tucking away an old-fashioned; Polly Thomson, the Scotch girl who came to them as secretary twenty-five years ago and became, in due course, the rock to which both of them clung in time of storm; and — on one such occasion which I recall — Harpo Marx, entranced at the privilege of performing for such a one as Helen, who is just about the best audience in this world. Only afterwards would a newcomer realize with a start that in that circle had been one who could neither see nor hear, but who, now touching Teacher's cheek with her left hand or holding out her right to Polly Thomson, had got as much as any of us out of the talk. As much or more. Watch Helen at a play and see how — I suppose through senses we have lost or never known — she, in perception and appreciation, is just a hair's breadth *ahead* of the rest of the house. It is *her* laugh, joyous as a sunburst, which leads all the rest.

### III

At Annie Sullivan's funeral there could have been no one who was not quick with a sense of the unimaginable parting which, after nearly fifty years, had just taken place. While I live I shall remember those services. Not for the great of the land who turned out for that occasion, not for the flowers that filled the church with an incomparable incense, nor for the wise and good things which Harry Emerson Fosdick said from the pulpit. No, what I shall remember longest was something I witnessed when

the services were over and the procession was filing down the aisle, Helen walking with Polly Thomson at her side. As they passed the pew where I was standing, I saw the tears streaming down Polly's cheeks. And something else I saw. It was a gesture from Helen — a quick flutter of her birdlike hands. She was trying to *comfort* Polly.

I saw them last on a December afternoon in the year just past — visited them on the remote New Hampshire farm to which Helen had beaten a retreat. As I came up the dirt road that wound its way to the farmhouse, she was waiting with so many things to show me. I remember the litter of drowsy puppies born of the Shetland collie Lord Aberdeen had given her. I remember a letter which had just come across the seas from Graham Robertson. 'Dear Helen Keller,' the letter began, 'Please take note that this is not a familiar form of address but quite the contrary. If I were called upon to address the Lady of Orleans, I could not begin "Dear Miss Jeanne d'Arc."'

Helen had retreated to that farm partly because, to one so dependent on her nose, such a city as New York in the automobile age is unbearably rank. Then she had to get away for a little while from the calls for help which reach her every day from the stricken cities of the world. Not, mind you, to get away for long. Annie Sullivan would count on her never to shirk. But just for enough quiet to let her put down on paper the story which only she can tell. For the book, when it is published, there can be, I think, only one title. That title would consist of only one word. The word is 'Teacher.'



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